



Build It And They Will Come: The Story Of Pepe Field

Pepe Field Success Story

Shouts of, "Play ball!" accompanied by the rhythmic thumping of basketballs and the gleeful noises of children at play have replaced the noxious odors that, for more than 20 years, emanated from Pepe Field in Boonton, New Jersey. This modern and heavily frequented park, lying in the midst of a dense residential neighborhood, resembles many others around the country: it includes a regulation little league field with an electronic scoreboard, a walking path, concession stands, a colorful playground, and a basketball court. However, the historical and symbolic importance of Pepe Field to this residential community makes this park one-of-a-kind.

When the E.F. Drew Chemical Company began dumping waste at this 3.5-acre site in 1920, local residents had no idea that they were witnessing the beginnings of an 80-year ordeal that would involve two renovations of the site and millions of dollars in cleanup and construction costs. The company disposed of waste from the manufacture of edible oils and cleaning products until 1950, when it finally abandoned the site, leaving it an open, unused area in the heart of a busy residential district. Fifteen years later, the Town of Boonton purchased the property, covered the site with sod, and began work on a park that would eventually include a tennis court, a playground, a refreshments stand, and a baseball field.

Shortly thereafter, a terrible smell began to permeate the air in and around Pepe Field. The Town of Boonton implemented an odor abatement plan in 1969, but the gases continued to seep from the former landfill, and the town had to close the field. As 90-year old Sally Bentley explains, "The smell was terrible. We all just got accustomed to it. My son Gerald used to play in it and come home with all this gunk on him." Further tests found that hazardous substances in a below-ground drain were releasing directly into the Rockaway River. The Rockaway River then emptied into the Boonton Reservoir, a major source of water for the surrounding area.

In 1983, Pepe Field was added to EPA's National Priorities List of hazardous waste sites needing cleanup. In 1985, the State of New Jersey took over the cleanup and began collecting data to determine what should be done with Pepe Field. State officials evaluated several options such as removing the waste or containing it within the site. These options were evaluated according to cost, effectiveness, and the impact on human health and safety. Four years later, state officials announced that securing the waste within the site boundaries presented the best option. They envisioned placing a thick layer of clay called a "cap" over



Pepe Field's complicated clean-up effort required an innovative approach to ensure the health and safety of Boonton's residents.

JUST THE FACTS:

- 90,000 residents in surrounding area
- Public involvement critical in crafting the best cleanup remedy possible
- Newly developed technology allowed for removal and off-site treatment of 85,000 tons of waste, allowing for safe reuse of the site

the site to contain contamination, monitoring the groundwater, implementing deed restrictions, and providing a better gas collection system. Town officials and local residents objected to the state's plan because it would prevent use of the site as a ball field and recreation area. However, due to the relatively high cost and danger associated with removing the waste from the site, containing it seemed to be the only viable option.

By late 1991, EPA had taken over the management of site activities. The Agency conducted a series of new tests and discovered that the buried waste extended beyond the boundaries of Pepe Field. In addition, these tests indicated that the gas and contaminated water leaking from the site were much more toxic than originally thought. This new data forced a re-evaluation of the possible remedies. Suddenly, the cost of removing the waste, compared to containment, was not nearly so extreme and the wish of Boonton residents to have their ball field back became an important factor. In 1997, EPA decided to change the original plan; it was decided that removal and off-site treatment of the waste presented the best option. EPA planned to utilize a newly developed technology to ensure that the excavation and removal would not pose a threat to nearby residents. Mixing the excavated waste with a neutralizing cement kiln dust made it safe to transport through the surrounding residential neighborhood and onto the off-site treatment plant. To the relief of Boonton residents, the new plans specified that "the site will be backfilled and restored for future use as a recreational facility in accordance with a detailed restoration plan to be developed with local officials."

As the bulldozers and dump trucks began rumbling onto the site, city officials worked with residents to come up with a design for the new park. A committee comprising Boonton residents was formed to discuss important issues and deal with differences of opinion before they presented the plan to town officials. Once a plan had been developed, it was presented to EPA officials for review; EPA then worked with engineers to make it a reality. Carol Browner, the EPA Administrator at the time, explained, "Public involvement has been absolutely critical in helping us craft the best cleanup remedy possible. Together, we arrived at a solution that will be permanent, require no long-term oversight, and it will allow the city to reuse the property for recreation, or for whatever it wants."

Six years later, Pepe Field continues to be a busy place. Instead of bulldozers and dump trucks, there are ball players and proud parents. The smell of rotten egg has been replaced by the aroma of roasting hotdogs, and the screech of heavy machinery has given way to the excited shouts of children on the playground. The Pepe Field story is a success story for many reasons. For the residents of Boonton, it represents the fruits of patience and perseverance, while EPA can take pride in having helped a community turn a liability into an asset. As Ms. Browner said at the park's opening, "The restoration of Pepe Field is a symbol of what we can accomplish when we work together to clean up these sites."

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Pepe Field now includes a regulation-size little league field with an electronic scoreboard and a concession stand.